



White Fragility

BASED ON INSIGHTS FROM
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Michael Eric Dyson (from Foreward)

The point of addressing White Fragility is to demand “That white folk finally mature and face the world they’ve made while seeking to help remake it for those who have neither their privilege nor their protection.”

Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Race

INSIGHTS AND CONFESSIONS

The problem of White Fragility

“Given how seldom we (white people) experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven’t had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race.”

“The mere mention that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses ... including emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt ... and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal ... These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy.”

Faulty Definition of Racism

Some of us are taught (overtly or covertly) to think about racism only as **discrete acts committed by individual people** (racists), rather than as a complex, interconnected system that affects every aspect of our culture.

If we (white people) believe that only bad people who intend to hurt others on the basis of (socially-constructed) “race” are racist, we may be outraged at any suggestion that we are involved in racism. Thus, we try to **defend our character** and refuse to receive feedback.

We must begin to understand **racism as a system into which we are socialized**. Only then can we receive feedback on our problematic racial patterns in a helpful way to support our learning, growth, and transformation.

Social Forces that Contribute

When we try to talk openly about race, white fragility emerges. These are not natural responses, but social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively, and they function to hold racial hierarchy in place.

These forces include the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, exceptionalism, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as a human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity.

Comfort vs. Discomfort

The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable. The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort.

To interrupt white fragility, we need to build our capacity to sustain the discomfort of not knowing, of being racially unmoored, and of racial humility.

Welcoming and making peace with discomfort are necessary if we are to make progress towards racial equity. One of the privileges afforded white people in our culture is that we can choose to “opt out” of thinking and talking about race and racism every day. If we want to work for racial justice, we must consciously choose to stick with it for the long haul (a lifetime), no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

How Whiteness Shapes Us

Being white shapes our perspectives, experiences, and responses.

We (white people) were born into a culture in which we **belong**, racially. (We may not feel a sense of belonging for other reasons: gender, sexuality, other status.) This experience of racial belonging is so natural that we do not have to think about it. The rare moments in which we do not belong racially (when we are a minority or feel out of step with the majority of people in a given context) come as a surprise to us. Since these situations are uncomfortable or unsettling, we can choose to make them temporary or avoidable. Or, we could embrace them.

We also have **freedom of movement**. We can move in almost any space and be seen (racially) as normal, neutral, or valuable.

How Whiteness Shapes Us (cont.)

We are seen as representing the **universal human experience**.

Virtually any representation of *human* is based on white people's norms and images – “flesh colored” makeup, standard emoji, depictions of religious and other heroes or god-figures (blue-eyed Jesus and Mary, etc.). Think about the color of band-aids, the race of every single face that appears on our money, or the standard hair care “products” that are available at any hotel. The list is endless, and the power of these things to reinforce whiteness as good, “normal,” and universal is that we don't even notice.

White Solidarity

White Solidarity is the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not to cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic.

If we keep quiet about racism, we are rewarded with social capital; if we interrupt racism, we are punished in ways big and small.

When we fail to hold one another accountable or to challenge racism when we see it, this is often experienced by people of color as a form of racism. (Sometimes, the racism perpetrated by “progressives” is more harmful than that of overt racists.)

White Racial Innocence

Sometimes, white people claim that because we grew up in segregation (i.e. “I didn’t know any black people growing up”), that we were sheltered from race and thus, are innocent of playing any part in structural racism.

Sometimes, we turn to people of color to become our “text books” and teach us about the racism we claim we don’t know anything about.

This requires nothing of us and reinforces unequal power relations by asking people of color to do our work. It also ignores the historical dimensions of race relations; it disregards how often people of color have already tried to tell us what racism is like for them and how often they have been dismissed.

The Good/Bad Binary

A central aspect of White Fragility is our buy-in to the false Good/Bad binary.

This completely ignores the structural nature of racism and focuses on individual acts of racial prejudice that are malicious and intentional. We know these are bad, so we seek at all costs to distance ourselves from being “bad” (racist) people.

Our binaries may take the shape of this:

The Good/Bad Binary (cont.)

Racist = Bad

Ignorant

Bigoted

Prejudiced

Mean-Spirited

Old

Southern

Not Racist = Good

Progressive

Educated

Open-Minded

Well-Intentioned

Young

Northern

The Good/Bad Binary (cont.)

If we buy into the good/bad binary, we want to be on the “good side” ... and thus to suggest that we are racist is to deliver a deep moral blow to us. Consequently, we think we must defend our character, and that is where all of our energy will go—to *deflecting* the charge rather than *reflecting* on our own behavior.

The good/bad binary makes it nearly impossible to talk with white people about racism – what it is, how it shapes all of us, and the inevitable ways we are conditioned to participate in it.

The simplistic idea that racism is limited to individual intentional acts committed by unkind people is at the root of virtually all white defensiveness on this topic. We must let go of this common belief.

“Color-Blind” Racism

“I don’t see color.”

“I was taught to treat everyone the same.”

Color-blindness may have started out as a well-intentioned strategy for interrupting racism, but in practice it has served to deny the reality of racism and thus hold it in place.

Our lack of understanding about implicit bias (which we all have) leads to aversive racism (a manifestation of racism that well-intentioned people who see themselves as educated and progressive are more likely to exhibit). We won’t see it because it conflicts with our self-perception as “good people.”

“Color-Celebrate” Racism

“I work in a very diverse environment.”

“I have people of color in my family.” “My spouse or children are POC.”

“I was on a mission in Africa.”

“My great-grandmother was a Native American princess.” (other claims of proximity)

These claims that we understand and hope to celebrate racial diversity function to exempt the person from any responsibility for or participation in the problem of racism. It takes race off the table for discussion, and closes (rather than opens) any further exploration. In so doing, these claims protect the racial status quo.

White Fragility in Action

White people's moral objection to racism (because we know it is wrong) increases our resistance to acknowledging our complicity within it. Those of us who position ourselves as liberal/progressive often opt to protect our moral reputations rather than recognize or change our participation in systems of inequity and domination that advantage us.

We may be receptive to theoretical/academic discussions of race/racism, but as soon as we are called out to notice what is racially problematic in or around us – in the moment – white fragility erupts.

White Fragility in Action (cont.)

Common emotional reactions that white people have when our assumptions or behaviors are challenged (i.e. when we are ‘called out’ on our racism) include:

Feelings:

- Singled out Attacked Silenced Shamed Guilty Accused
- Insulted Judged Outraged Scared Angry

Behaviors:

- Crying Physically Leaving Emotionally Withdrawing
- Arguing Denying Focusing on Intentions (vs. Impact)
- Seeking Absolution Avoiding Over-intellectualizing

White Fragility in Action (cont.)

White fragility functions to:

Maintain white solidarity

Close off self-reflection

Trivialize the reality of racism

Silence the discussion

Make white people the victims

Hijack the conversation

Protect a limited worldview

Focus on the messenger (vs. message)

Take race off the table

Rally more resources to white people

How to Counter White Fragility

An antidote to White Fragility is to build our stamina to bear witness to the pain of racism that we cause. It is also to open ourselves to receive feedback on the terms of the person giving it rather than our own (i.e. usually in private, when we want it, in nice ways, etc.).

The ubiquitous socializing power of white supremacy cannot be avoided. If we enter the conversation with this knowledge, we can be free to focus on *how* rather than *if* our racism is manifest. When we move beyond the good/bad binary, we can become eager to identify our racist patterns because interrupting those patterns is of utmost importance.

Stopping our racist patterns must be more important than convincing others that we don't have them. We do have them, and BIPOC already know we have them; our efforts to prove otherwise are not convincing. An honest accounting of these patterns is no small task given the power of white fragility and white solidarity, but it is necessary.

How to Counter White Fragility (cont.)

From a transformed paradigm, when we are given feedback on our inevitable racist patterns, we might change our responses:

Feelings:

- | | | | |
|--------------|------------|------------|----------|
| ◦ Gratitude | Excitement | Discomfort | Guilt |
| ◦ Motivation | Humility | Compassion | Interest |

Behaviors:

- | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------|
| ◦ Reflection | Seeking Understanding | Apology | Grappling |
| ◦ Listening | Engaging | Processing | Believing |

How to Counter White Fragility (cont.)

What can we (white people) do or remember when our white fragility surfaces?

- Breathe
- Invite feedback in any form and whenever someone wants to give it
- Listen
- Reflect
- Seek someone with stronger analysis if we are confused
- Take the time we need to process feelings but return to the situation and the persons involved
- Nurture cross-racial relationships that allow for honest sharing
- Try to interrupt and change patterns of defensiveness, avoidance, and over-explaining intent

Keys to Moving Forward

- Humility
- Relationship
- Accountability
- Commitment to *Anti-Racism*
- Sustained Learning and Action